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Ways of Life at a Crossroads. Aksënov's *Ostrov Krym* (Island of Crimea)

by Tatjana Hofmann

Abstract

Aksënov's novel *Ostrov Krym* (Island of Crimea) plays with the idea that Crimea is not a peninsula but an isolated, non-Soviet, liberal island. The narrative tension, centred on the affair of the male and the female main character, asks whether Russia should develop towards the western or the eastern world. Aksënov's novel can be read as part of the underground pop culture in the late Soviet Union as well as a space for discussion of its non-official, desired, demanded or dreaded cultural vectors.

Keywords: Aksënov, Crimea, alternative vision, Eastern vs. Western Europe, mass culture and high culture.

The following article addresses aspects of everyday culture in the fictional space of the alternative Crimea. It takes the novel *Ostrov Krym* (Island of Crimea) as an example, tracing some of its references to cultural visions and habits, and the function they carry out for the text structure and the novel's effect. What we find are dominant, historically still popular cultural 'voices' as the two main positions of the novel are caught between the western and the eastern world. The main tension, centered on the affair of the male and the female main character, conveys the traditional question of which way Russia should develop. Both cultural layers and the narrative structure are characterized by antagonisms and ambivalences, combining mass culture and high culture, sympathy and antipathy for the Soviet Union and for Crimea / 'the West', respectively. Using this approach, the novel tries not to romanticize Crimea as a southern, arcadian, perhaps superior place in contrast to the Soviet Union, but as an indispensable part of it – and at the same time as a distorting mirror of the western world. This article tries to participate in the narrative's discussion without coming too close to the proposed cultural concepts. It aims for a close reading which tries to avoid any politically biased labelling of these visions.

Aspects of popular culture in Vasilii P. Aksënov's *Ostrov Krym* (Island of Crimea)

When exploring popular culture in the late Soviet Union, it is worth taking fictional literature into account as well. By way of condensation and (re-)production of knowledge, fiction can be regarded as a parallel discourse to the empirical world which condenses mass culture, subculture and also the so-called high culture in the case of Russian literature. My preferred terms 'way of life' / 'everyday culture' (in Russian: *byt*) comprise popular culture in the sense of mass culture, and subculture in the sense of alternative culture – their meaning depends on the context as they overlap. In terms of Russian popular culture, we deal with a concept that grew in the second half of the nineteenth century from sympathy for *narodnost'*, the simple folk, peasant life and equitable forms of possessions. While authors like Gertsen, Chernyshevskii and Dobroliubov elaborated their utopian socialism in opposition to the tsarist regime, the ideal of justice for all classes has been implemented in the official, state-controlled mass culture in the Soviet Union. In Soviet literature and arts the corresponding aesthetical programme is known as the style of social realism proclaimed in 1934.

The definition of popular culture leads us to a complex history of the term, reaching across Europe and based on its opposition to 'high culture'. In the German-language countries the post-war discourse is determined by scepticism towards the superficial and illusive mass amusement. Within this academic division a post-Herderian interest in mass culture (*Volks-* and *Alltagskultur*) rather emanates from empirical cultural studies, whereas 'high culture', including literature, is investigated mainly by theoretical orientated philologies.¹ While the latter primarily focuses on aesthetics of canonical works, British cultural studies have drawn attention to the social function of text genres outside the official literary canon. They instead belong to youth culture, for example song texts and sex-and-violence novels.² In the beginning of the 1990s this approach was criticized for its naive optimism as mass culture inevitably involves consumerism and ideological appropriation.³ At the same time, the difference between 'high' and 'low' cultures fades away with the increasing usage of plurimedial electronic mass media. In Russia of the twentieth century, literature, even artistically sophisticated literature, often seems to belong to both elite culture and cultural heritage familiar to millions of people such as poems and quotations often known by heart. Due to this culture of reception, the value of published and forbidden books, the density of intertextual references between

self-preserving text systems, and large-scale printing, the "good old" book deserves to be called a Soviet/Russian mass medium of the twentieth century. Thus, literature reflects the typical Russian way of life and, at the same time, reading is part of everyday practices. In addition to that, literature provides potentially polysemantical space for the interaction of cultural signs. Fictional explorations of culture arise when the text creates a semantical space for several cultural 'voices'. The most interesting scenario does not aim to establish a hierarchy of certain messages, but lets the readers instead decide which position they would like to take towards the phenomena presented. As Raymond Williams, one of the cultural studies scholars, writes: "*A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested.*"⁴ This battle between inclusion and exclusion remains a trait of culture in general. Not only after the alphabetization and writing campaigns in the Soviet Union, but also before the October Revolution, literature and journalism were the main media of politically controversial opinions on culture for centuries, despite waves of suppression and censorship. Actually, popular culture might be considered as a voice itself in a totalitarian state, as it is partly inside the official discourse and partly outside. The chosen writer and this novel were prominent representatives of a subcultural network of officially hardly acknowledged writers in the late Soviet Union. It was not until after Stalin's death that the first subculture – the so called *stiliagi*⁵ – appeared in the Sovi-

1 For a detailed history of the term see: Hermann Herlinghaus, "Populär/volkstümlich/Popularkultur", *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, eds. Karl-Heinz Barck et al., vol. 4, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 2002, pp. 832–884.

2 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1957, p. 251.

3 Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Rock, die Konserveativen und die Postmoderne*, Wien: Löcker, 2010 (1992).

4 Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary" (1958), *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gable, London / New York: Verso, 1989, pp. 3–14, here p. 12.

5 The 'stiliagi'-movement was a youth subculture in bigger cities in the USSR from the 1940s until the

et Union. Vasilii P. Aksënov (1932-2009), son of Evgenia Ginzburg, had a dissident background, and lived as a 'stiliaga' in the Soviet Union. This was part of the non-official popular culture, which was primarily available to the youth of the elite and was expressed by literature, too. Together with Viktor V. Erofeev he co-edited the underground almanach *MetrOpol*. After publishing prose like *Kollegi* (*Colleagues*, 1960) and *Zvezdnyi bilet* (*Ticket to the Stars*, 1961) in the magazine *Iunost'*, Aksënov was considered as one of the authors contributing to the *Thaw* (*ottepel'*) and a member of the so called *Shestidesiatniki* movement. Aksënov's texts, which use slang and are not prudish, were read and welcomed by the young generation as an affront against the official aesthetics and values.⁶ He turned out to be an author some of whose works had to wait for decades to be published in the Soviet Union and who had to leave his homeland with the consequence that the state withdrew his citizenship in January 1981.⁷ This biographical background represents one of the 'cultural voices' in *Ostrov Krym*.⁸ The novel's most striking assumption plays with a geographical idea: Crimea is not a peninsula but an island. In addition to that, it assumes an alternative historical development by the suggestion that the Russian civil war ends when the tsarist forces are able to hold on to this southern piece of the old empire. After

the Whites defeated the Red Army in 1920 they preserved an aristocratic Russia which was developing in a capitalist, liberal, economically and politically more successful way than the Soviet Union. This isolated, Swiss-like Crimea stayed neutral during and after World War II. The novel, originally published in *samizdat*, contributed to Aksënov's popularity in Moscow's underground. It might reveal "the author's frustration with the West's gullibility in its relation to the Soviet Union",⁹ reflecting the disappointment of the *Shestidesiatniki* and their lack of action. Written in 1979 shortly before his emigration, *Ostrov Krym* first officially appeared in Ann Arbor in 1981 after Aksënov moved to the United States in 1980. In the Soviet Union, it was only published in 1990 in the first issues of the magazine *Iunost'* – the bestseller of the year. First of all, the book was understood as a critique of the Soviet invasion politics. Primarily, Aksënov's fantasy island provokes the stagnated Soviet official culture of the Brezhnev-era with an integrating approval of both pre-revolutionary and western everyday culture. Looking back, the novel anticipates the cultural period after 1985:

The reordering of popular culture since Mikhail Gorbachev's advent to power in 1985 after the brief interludes of Andropov and Chernenko was marked by unprecedented freedom of expression – the cultural side of glasnost – and a legitimation by the authorities of spontaneously generated culture from below. This brought changes in reading habits, show attendance, film and television viewing, musical styles, and non-structured leisure; the quickening of amateur culture; and a decentralization of cultural life

1960s. These young people were keen on the American way of life, western music and dance with the tendency to dress in a non-Soviet way and establish their own slang. For more information view the article by Gleb Tsipursky in this volume.

⁶ Viktor Esipov, "Chetyre zhizni Vasiliia Aksenova", *Vasilii Aksenov – odinokii begun na dlinnye distancii*, ed. Viktor Esipov, Moskva: Astrel', pp. 7-18, p. 9.

⁷ Citizenship was returned to him in 1990.

⁸ Vasilii Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, Ann Arbor: Ardis 1981; Vassily Aksyonov: *The Island of Crimea*, transl. by Michael H. Heim, New York: Aventura, 1984.

⁹ Konstantin Kustanovich, *The Artist and the Tyrant: Vassily Aksenov's Works in the Brezhnev Era*, Columbus: Slavica, 1992, p. 37.

through the spread of electronic media. [...] The new popular culture – much of it legalized ‘old’ culture – contained strong currents of iconoclasm, demythologizing, and open irreverence. The ridicule of sacred icons that could previously be voiced only in underground anecdotes, paintings, and songs was now publicly heard. For the first time in memory, nude pictures and obscene lyrics appeared in public places as did heretofore unseen levels of shock and violence in movies and TV. This evoked counter currents of envy, resentment, and hostility.¹⁰

Moreover, the novel is an example of a belletristic vision that has become common cultural knowledge, a part of Russian everyday culture. Zoia Boguslavskaia made a similar observation on Aksënov’s use of subcultural oral language: “то ли Аксенов внес в литературу городской молодежный сленг начала шестидесятых, то ли молодежь заговорила языком его героев”.¹¹ Again, (fictional) slang carries cultural and political connotation in the considered novel as it stands for a new international youth culture (*Iaki*) in Crimea. Together with embodiments of virulent cultural-political ideas by main figures, characters drawn in black-and-white, an action-led dramaturgy, and, in terms of its genre, political tensions, the novel has an entertaining style of a pop-cultural product like a spy novel or political thriller. “Written in the late 1970s, the Crimean novel is a thoroughly fictional assessment of the same period, a parody on a James Bond fantasy.”¹² This impression arises straight from the begin-

ning. In *Ostrov Krym*, popular culture delivers a means for the ‘popping up’ of converse cultural-political ideas advocated by interacting protagonists and by historical coincidence. The nuance of ‘pop-up’, a suddenly imposed proposition, starts with the fictitious, accidentally emerging topography of an island. The narrative proposes that after the October Revolution the Whites fled to Crimea on foot across the frozen sea separating it from the Soviet landmass. The Bolsheviks were not able to follow them because a British vessel, positioned in the Black Sea, shot at the ice, causing it to break under the feet of the pursuers. Therefore, its spatial structure determines the political development of Crimea as well as its economy. Like its extraordinary geography, its wealth seems to emerge of its own accord, when we follow the thoughts of the male protagonist Luchnikov, who introduces us to this place:

‘Откуда все-таки взялось наше богатство?’ – в тысячный раз спрашивал себя Лучников, глядя с фриуэя вниз на благодатную зеленую землю, где мелькали прямоугольные, треугольные, овальные, почковидные пятна плавательных ‘пулов’ и где по вьющимся местным дорогам медленно в больших ‘кадиллаках’ ездил друг к другу в гости зажиточные яки. Аморально богатая страна.¹³

These landscapes appear like an exaggerated image of the prototypical ‘beautiful island’, especially as they form the setting for adventures reminiscent of western political thrill-

10 Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 178.

11 Ibid., p. 8: “Either Aksënov has transferred young people’s slang of the 1960s into literature or the young people have started to speak the language of his protagonists.” (My translation.)

12 Olga Matich, “Vasilii Aksënov and the Literature of Convergence: *Ostrov Krym* as Self-Criticism”, *Slavic Review* 47.4, 1988, pp. 642-651, here p. 643.

13 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, pp. 12-13; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 8: “Where does all our wealth come from? Luchnikov asked himself for the thousandth time, looking down over the land-of-plenty landscape dotted with rectangular, triangular, oval, and kidney-shaped swimming pools and crisscrossed by winding back roads now bearing Cadillacs full of wealthy Yakis to their wealthy Yaki friends. Yes, an immorally rich country.”

ers, and they remain the focus of the novel, regardless of its shifts to Moscow and Paris.

Dialogical entanglement of the protagonists

The novel's dialogical structure within the triangle Crimea – Moscow – Paris is underpinned by the main characters Andrei Luchnikov and Tat'iana Lunina who have a love affair, and whose interaction embodies the geocultural disruption between the island and the rest of Europe. Both work in the mass media, which is necessary for the dissemination of popular culture: Andrei is the editor-in-chief of a nostalgic magazine promoting the idea of a 'common destiny' with Russia, while Lunina hosts the television programme *Vremia* in Moscow, and later on becomes a spy working for the Soviet Union in Crimea. They are both physical: Like Luchnikov, Lunina is dedicated to sports as a former professional athlete. Luchnikov, the leader of the party *Common Destiny*, represents the majority of the island's population which longs for reunification with the Soviet Union and expects a peaceful transition. He offers a slow and non-violent reunion with the Soviet Union, which initially agrees, but then starts to invade Crimea forcefully, eliminating all opponents. The end of the novel, in particular, is reminiscent of a suspense-packed thriller: Andrei's son manages to escape with his girlfriend and their baby, the symbol of a future reborn. The ending can be interpreted as either a tragic or happy end and, looking at it after the spring of 2014, as anticipatory from both points of view – that of the Russian medial reception (peaceful reunification) and the western one (illegal occupation). Due to the narrative's changing personal point of view we are able to experience that place through the eyes of the protagonists but still from a distant perspective. Both figures can be

called 'experiencing mediums' representing ambivalent cultural concepts around the Russian idea: Luchnikov stands for the pre-Soviet Russian idea with a tendency to sovietize it, and Lunina stands for the Soviet Russian idea with a westernizing tendency. Luchnikov is searching for the Russian 'spirit' but this endeavour is broken by ironic moments; similarly Lunina's quest for the Crimean life with Luchnikov is foiled by her emotional return to her husband in Moscow. The partners complement each other, demonstrating how Soviet order longs for Crimea (Lunina) and how the Crimean order (Luchnikov) feeds a nostalgic attitude towards an ideal Russia 'behind' the Soviet Union. In sum, they contribute to the popularization of Crimea as a place of pleasure and passion, but also as one of unpredictability where fate / the sujet might suddenly change. The narrator takes a relatively outside position in a Bakhtinian sense, allowing us to watch from this perspective a flow of different, even antagonistic 'cultural voices'.¹⁴ The characters rarely speak for themselves in the first person. With the introspection into the protagonists' experiences, the narrator enters and conveys the traits of a specific way of life on Crimea where their ambivalence increases: They are exposed to different everyday cultures in the laboratory of fictional space, transmitting contradictions and overlaps to the reader. While Luchnikov mainly represents the Crimean order by taking it for granted, Lunina is the narration's guide through the Crimean world as a would-be local who in fact remains a stranger. With the help of her often naïve perception, the narrator not only informs the reader about the specifics of life

¹⁴ Bakhtin has defined heteroglossy as a plurality of 'voices' without the author's predominance. For further reading: Sylvia Sasse, *Michail Bakhtin zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius-Verlag, 2010, pp. 40-43.

on the island but also provides insight into the richness of the Russian woman's joyful emotional states bordering on dangerous situations – Lunina is a figure of female sacrifice whereas Luchnikov tries to be the superhero.¹⁵

Superman in a simulacrum: Luchnikov's Soviet affair

Luchnikov's positive and western traits refer to attributes of pop-cultural heroes. As Olga Matich points out, Luchnikov "embodies all the archetypal talents of Aksënov's superman."¹⁶ Having a closer look at a) how Luchnikov is introduced in the novel and b) how his reunion (which is also readable on a political level) with his Soviet affair Lunina is introduced, we witness Luchnikov's role as a figure between pre-Soviet Russia, the Soviet Union and Crimean/western *byt*. First of all, the joy of living on the island embodied by Luchnikov stands for the features of the Crimean way of life such as the desired (Soviet) Russia. This superman is portrayed as a gentleman of past times and benchmark of the island's hybrid culture: He combines physical awareness, personal happiness and spiritual values, although the latter are ironically conveyed as already anachronistic in the 1970s. The wedding of this James Bond-like hero – he meets his wife after being injured during the Hungarian uprising in 1956 – sets an example for a new youth culture.¹⁷ His sexual adventures later on strengthen his quest to remain young, attractive and successful. The very first of the novel's 14 chapters intro-

duces a spectrum of protagonists representing the political and cultural views to be discussed in the course of the novel. "In a typical example of convergence, the Soviet and western 1960s are brought together on the Russian island."¹⁸ We get to know three generations of the Luchnikov family as they meet at grandfather Arsenii's house.¹⁹ The three 'alpha-males' – their names all start with an A – discuss the major political trends on the island and, accordingly, three ways of life: The grandson Anton, who has just returned from a year of travelling the world, lives the hippie-like youth movement called *Iaki* which is opposed to the idea of the reunion with Russia and orientated towards the US;²⁰ Andrei, in the middle, advocates the reunion with the Soviet Union and the eldest, Arsenii, represents the preservation of the aristocratic way of life on Crimea. Andrei is at the center of the narration. From the very first paragraph on, the narrator puts the reader on the same observation level as himself. Together we look down on the phallic newspaper building – and at the narrator's uncertainty when his book will be published:

Всякий знает в центре Симферополя, среди его сумасшедших архитектурных экспрессий, дерзкий в своей простоте, похожий на очиненный карандаш, небоскреб газеты 'Русский Курьер'. К началу нашего повествования, на исходе довольно сумбурной редакционной ночи, весной, в конце текущего десятилетия или в начале будущего (зависит от времени выхода книги) мы видим издателя-редактора этой газеты 46-летнего Андрея Арсениевича Лучникова в его личных апартаментах, на 'верхотуре'. Этим советским

15 Although the novel itself has an extraordinary position and does not resemble any other prose by its writer, Luchnikov is a typical character within Aksënov's oeuvre.

16 Matich, "Vasilii Aksënov and the Literature of Convergence", p. 647.

17 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 30.

18 Matich, "Vasilii Aksënov and the Literature of Convergence", p. 646.

19 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 42.

20 Ibid., p. 24.

словечком холостяк Лучников с удовольствием именовал свой плейбойский пентхауз.²¹

From the outset, the reader is confronted with Luchnikov's sinner ambivalence towards Crimean and Soviet life (managing the newspaper *Russian Courier* and founding the party *Union of Common Destiny*), his hyperbolic male power and his crucial function within the narration. With some self-irony Luchnikov observes how he mistakes a traffic light for a church, disapproves of Simferopol's modern aesthetics, for instance the unusual shape of a church, and misses the feeling of nostalgia in this town. Andrei does not fully appreciate the simulacrum-like visuality and loss of traditional values of material culture and social practices on Crimea. Sticking to the grotesque exaggeration of his dialogical style, the narrator stresses the imaginative character of the world Luchnikov lives in (what reminds us of the theatre stage on which Lunina will end up), hence showing Luchnikov's search for depth and meaning behind the artificial world of commerce and entertainment:

Вдруг пейзаж стал резко меняться. Лунный профиль Сюрю-Кая значительно растянулся, и показалось, что стоишь перед обширной лунной поверхностью, изрезанной каньонами и щелями клыкастых гор. Ошеломляющая новизна

²¹ Ibid., p. 9; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 3: "Everyone knows the *Russian Courier* skyscraper, insolent in its pencil-point simplicity among the wild monuments to architectural self-expression in downtown Simferopol. As our story begins – at the end of a hard night at the teletype machines, a spring night late in the present decade or early in the decade to come (depending on when this book comes out) – we find the publisher-editor of the *Courier*, forty-six-year-old Andrei Arsenievich Luchnikov, in his suite atop the skyscraper. Although he prefers more modest names for it, it is in fact a playboy's penthouse."

пейзажа! За Волошинским седым холмом вдруг вырос некий базальтовый истукан. Шаг в сторону – из моря поднимается неведомая прежде скала с гротом у подножия... Тогда он вспомнил: Диснейлэнд для взрослых! Он уже где-то читал об этом изобретении коктебельской скучающей администрации. Так называемые 'Аркады Воображения'. Экое свинство – ни один турист не замечает перехода из мира естественного в искусственный: первозданная природа вливается сюда через искусно замаскированные проемы в стенах. Вливается и дополняется замечательными имитациями. Каждый шаг открывает новые головокружительные перспективы. У большинства посетителей возникает здесь особая эйфория, необычное состояние духа. Не забыта и коммерция. Там и сям в изгибах псевдомира разбросаны бары, ресторанчики, витрины дорожных магазинов.²²

In this description of a shopping center, by

²² Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, pp. 44-46; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 48: "Then, abruptly, the landscape began to lose the contours he knew so well. It turned into a moonscape, crisscrossed with canyons and ravines. Unbelievable! Whole new configurations! A basalt boulder rising like an idol from behind a hill. Then two feet away – a completely uncharted hill sloping gently to the water, a grotto at its base ... Only then did he remember. Of course! The municipal board had grown tired of having nothing to do and thought up a Disneyland for adults. Fantasy Arcades they called it, and it was totally obscene! No tourist could possibly distinguish between what was natural and what was artificial; primeval nature made its appearance through skillfully masked openings in special prefabricated walls and was then complemented by remarkable imitations. Every step opened new vertiginous perspectives and vistas. The result in most visitors was a curious stage of being, a kind of euphoria. And that's where business came in. Tucked away in the cozy little corners of this pseudoworld were elegant bistros, boutiques, even whole department stores."

stressing the seductive power of imitations the narrator seems to refer to Grigorii A. Potëmkin (1739-1791), an army officer, politician and lover of Catherine the Great. Potëmkin showed rich scenery of Crimea when he had to present the results of his appropriation of the rather undeveloped peninsula to the Russian monarch and international diplomats. The perception of the cliffs as art in Koktebel', together with the romantic attributes of moonlight, draw upon the symbolist poet Maksimilian A. Voloshin (1877-1932). However, the term "Disneyland for adults" deconstructs the alluring atmosphere as the elusive feelings ("euphoria") and the entire setting are not authentic. As E. Meila states: "Остров Крым – симулякр в бодрийяровском смысле: избыточность всех его знаков ведет к потере конкретной субстанции и аутентичности."²³ Incidentally, the surnames of both protagonists imply a "shine" that reminds us of the moon or rays, respectively. The above passage anticipates Luchnikov and Lunina's break-up. At this intersection of the real and the artificial world, of the past, present and future, of Crimea and Russia, Luchnikov meets (and deconstructs) Lunina while she is studying perfumes in a window display and identifies her as a Soviet citizen:

Отец, сын, любовь, прошлое и будущее – все соединилось и взбаламутилось непонятной надеждой. Остров и Континент. Россия... Центр жизни, скрещенье дорог.

23 E. Meila, "Krym u Vasilii Aksënova: Ot zhizni k tekstu i obratno", *Krymskii tekst v russkoi kul'ture: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferencii*. Sankt-Peterburg, 4-6th of Sept. 2006, eds. Nina Buhks and Mariia Virolajnen, Sankt-Peterburg 2008, pp. 226-234, p. 230; <http://lib.pushkinskijdom.ru/Default.aspx?tabid=8917> (access 28 Sept. 2017). "The Island of Crimea is a simulacrum in the sense of Baudrillard: the abundance of all its signs leads to a loss of a concrete substance and authenticity." (My translation.)

*– Танька, – сказал он. – Давай-ка поскорей выбираться из этой чертовой комнаты смеха.*²⁴

His order towards her indicates that he tries to pull her out of the bizarre in-between state, offering her a committed relationship. The setting is symbolic. Lunina will remain between the two worlds of Soviet Union and Crimea, between her family and Luchnikov whom she eventually rejects. After Lunina's husband finds out who his rival is and casts Luchnikov out, the narrator shows Andrei's state of mind from the inside. Suddenly, he reveals an emerging solidarity with the *Iaki*-movement Andrei's son stands for, as the rejected hero projects his hatred of Lunina's husband onto the Soviet Union:

*Вот моя родина и вот мое счастье – Остров Крым посреди волн свободы. Мы никогда не сольемся с вами, законопослушные, многомиллионные, северная унылая русская сволочь. Мы не русские по идеологии, мы не коммунисты по национальности, мы яки-островитяне, у нас своя судьба, наша судьба – карнавал свободы, мы сильнее вас, каким бы толстым стеклом вы, суки, не бросали нам в голову!*²⁵

However, this incident does not stop Luch-

24 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 46; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, pp. 49-50: "Father, son, love, past, and future all blended together into a vague feeling of expectation and hope. The Island and the continent. Russia. The center of life, the place where all roads converged... 'Tanya,' he said, 'let's get the hell out of this hellhole of a fun house!'"

25 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 133; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 153: "Crimea is my only home, my pride, my joy. The Island of Crimea floating free among the waves. We shall never merge with you, you law-abiding, monumental, hulking, northern, Russian swine, you! We're not Russian by ideology, we're not communist by nationality; we're Yaki Islanders, we have a fate of our own. Our fate is the carnival of freedom, and it makes us stronger, no matter how thick the glass you bastards hurl at our heads!"

nikov in his quest to embrace Soviet culture when he is in Moscow. He uses Sovietisms and tries to understand his 'home country' in order to feel like a 'real' Russian, for example insisting on having a men's talk in the sauna. Nonetheless, Luchnikov's adjustment to Soviet *byt* is characterized like bad mimicry. When he is seen by Lunina wearing Soviet clothes, these artefacts make her react in a negative sense of estrangement²⁶ – just like when her husband is picking her up in Moscow on her return from Crimea.²⁷ Regardless of remarks by others who consider his attitude ridiculous,²⁸ Luchnikov's longing for the Soviet Union is presented as a stronger one than Lunina's longing for Crimea. He is not only desiring but also acting on his dream by importing western pop-cultural goods like jazz records, jeans and shows, when he travels to Moscow.²⁹ Taking Arjun Appadurai's concept of transculturality into account,³⁰ Luchnikov fulfills the expectations of his Soviet friends by transmitting the everyday culture of Crimea and the west to Moscow with goods like forbidden music, magazines, and other desired products. Once he forgets to buy western goods, he immediately develops a bad conscience when thinking of it. The narrator uses this opportunity to expand mockingly the long list of goods missed and longed for in the Soviet Union.³¹ To sum up, Luchnikov represents the *convergence* Matich writes about, mainly the western male adventurer as well

as the pre-revolutionary Russian aristocrat and the political activist living for the ideal of a Euro-Soviet Crimean hybridity. His Crimea stands for a cultural medium, an intersection between an old Europe and a new Russia.

Lunina, the failed spy in a blockbuster

For Lunina, who has an eccentric lifestyle with ups and downs in both places, it seems that the two worlds, Moscow and Crimea, are ambivalent. Her experiences with Luchnikov represent an exception to her Soviet life in Moscow. Yet, what she experiences on Crimea without him is horrible, as she is not able to control her state of mind: Lunina fails to be a spy and a prostitute, becomes an actress in a movie without knowing and later on gets caught up in sexual violence. Thus, the allusion to Aleksandr Grin's romantic fantasy *Alye parusa* (*Red Sails*, 1923), which was about a western nobleman arriving on a boat with red sails and taking his bride from Crimea with him, transforms into an emotional disaster of self-loss. Lunina also acts as cultural transmitter, unlike Luchnikov: By travelling between both places and their cultures she is able to send her 'Crimeanness' to her Moscow environment by (literally) transmitting a subversive message through the way she looks at the TV images: "Такие лица могут незаметно, год за годом, десятилетие за десятилетием, изменять психологическую структуру населения."³² As the attractive woman, Lunina is cast in the role of a sex object from the point of view of a typical male gaze in both worlds, she symbolically transports the Crimean atmosphere by way of her person-

26 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 187.

27 Ibid., p. 48.

28 The American Buxter is also used for a comment on Luchnikov's vision: He explains that romantic nostalgia is supposed to be the best attitude of mankind. Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 184.

29 Ibid., p. 54.

30 Referring to Arjun Appadurai it might be called a case of a *mediascape*. (Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis et al.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996.)

31 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, pp. 99-100.

32 Ibid., p. 79; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 70: "Year by year, decade by decade, faces like that can imperceptibly alter the psychological structure of the population."

al habits, for instance her style of dress.³³ It is striking that her 'aura' is not a political one – she is not trying to fight the system. Like Luchnikov, she could act subversively against the Soviet Union but actually both of them remain hopeful of a reasonable Soviet Russia. Lunina's attractiveness stands for the Russian absorption of some western leisure culture and also hints at the Black Sea coast, which in the nineteenth century started to develop into the Russian Riviera. We find her interested in the luxurious everyday life on Crimea, but politically she stays loyal to her homeland and, in terms of marriage, to her husband. Becoming a spy radicalizes both her patriotism for the Soviet Union and her fascination for Crimea. Now that she has permission to enter the most forbidden places, the narrator is able to sketch them.³⁴ Through these stylistic means Aksënov's novel provides visions of several cities, which resemble small copies of western megapolises. Simferopol', the regional capital with the westernized name 'Simfi' is architecturally the most interesting city.³⁵ Feodosiia is the most stylish one, while Sevastopol' has the most impressive skyscrapers, and Evpatoriia and Gurzuf have the most beautiful villas. While following Lunina on her trips the narrator emphasizes the exceptional features of the most western city, Ialta. This city stands for Crimea's young generation's ideology of demonstrating Ialta as the most non-Soviet place. Lunina's shifting between the two worlds shapes their differences, particularly when the reader observes her problems adapting to a new situation. This happens, for instance, after she returns from Crimea. Estrangement also occurs when she looks at the positive sides of her

regular Soviet life. After a devastating experience during the shooting of a movie that anticipates the novel's ending – a blockbuster on the Soviet annexation of Crimea – she mentally escapes Crimea and her affair with Luchnikov:

*Улечу завтра в Москву, пошлю к черту Лучникова, Сергеева с его фирмой просто на хуй, заберу детей из пионерлагеря, починю машину и все поедem к Суту в Цахкадзор. Буду тренироваться вместе с ним. Только он один меня искренне любит, и я его жена, а он мой муж, он мне все простит, и я буду жить в нашем, в моем мире, где всего не хватает, где все всего боятся, да-да, это более нормальный мир; поступлю куда-нибудь продавицей или кладовщиком на продбазу, буду воровать и чувствовать себя нормальным человеком.*³⁶

This accident shows that local Crimeans, unlike Lunina, are conscious of their society being a model, a realized dream and theatrical stage for a possible future Russia. The feeling of being on a theatre stage goes along with the fear that the peninsula might become an international *vertep* (a Ukrainian puppet theatre), as Luchnikov's colleague Gangut says.³⁷ Final-

36 Ibid., p. 190; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 218: "I'm going to catch the first plane back to Moscow. Screw Luchnikov, screw Sergeev and Co. I'll take the kids out of the Pioneer Camp, have the car repaired, and drive down to Tsakhkadzor with them to visit the Hub. I'll go into training with him. He's the only one who really loves me, I'm his wife, he's my husband, he'll forgive me, and I'll go back to living in our world, my world, a world where you can't get anything you need and everybody's afraid of everything, the real world. I'll find a job selling fruits and vegetables and live a normal life of thievery."

37 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 28: "Безвизный въезд, беспощинная торговля... – все это, конечно, невероятно обогащает наше население, но день за днем мы становимся международным вертепом почище Гонконга." Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 27: "Relaxed visa restrictions. Duty-free trade. It will do wonders for our coffers, all right, but at the rate we're going, we'll end up more a den of international iniquity than Hong Kong itself."

33 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 49.

34 Ibid., p. 167.

35 This is already stated at the beginning of the novel. Ibid., p. 9.

ly, the movie about the reunification of Crimea with Russia, which was already planned in the first third of the novel, becomes not only a vision: “Они снимут гигантский блокбастер о воссоединении Крыма с Россией. Трагический, лирический, иронический, драматический, реалистический и ‘сюр’, в самом своем посыле супер-фильм.”³⁸ These attributes can be read as a commentary on the novel as rather “tragic, lyrical, ironic, dramatic, realistic and surrealistic”, ending with the destruction of a hybrid Crimea and the end of a dialogue about its development. Finally, we are dealing with an anti-utopia where values are turned upside down as liberal society eventually loses its freedom and independence.

Cultural hybridity of the Crimean way(s) of life

The Crimean way of life, represented by the protagonists, is politicized – culture goes along with expression of power, regardless of whether the protagonist uses it overtly or implicitly. The novel refers to popular culture in terms of symbols and their purposeful use. The omniscient narrator lets us observe these instrumentalization processes, for instance when Andrei gives a record to his father – the song *Kakhovka* reminds the elder of the Civil War – in order to let him approach the “Idea of a Common Destiny” which Andrei is striving for.³⁹ In his professional life Luchnikov reflects

38 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 91; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 104: “A blockbuster. A good old-fashioned sweeping epic about the reunification of Crimea and Russia. Tragic, lyric, ironic, dramatic, realistic, surrealistic – a sure winner.”

39 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 18: “Прелюбопытным образом советская ‘Каховка’ стала любимой песней старого врзвакуанта. Лучников-младший, конечно же, с удовольствием подарил отцу пластинку: еще один шаг к Идее Общей Судьбы, которую он проповедовал.” Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 15: “And so the Soviet song ‘Kakhovka’ came to be the favorite of an old provacuee. Needless to say,

about how to use an artefact of mass culture, namely a dissident reportage about the terrible cafés in the Soviet Union. Publishing it in his magazine would allow him to pretend that he advocates anti-Soviet propaganda. In general, the Russian patriot refuses to report negatively about everyday culture in the Soviet Union, which he considers as his country, too.⁴⁰ Popular culture, even if it partly appears superficial and emotionally exaggerated, cannot be separated from political culture. Life on Crimea seems to embody the Russian as well as the Soviet longing for the west as a well-off paradise. Correspondingly, everyday culture on the island consists of many elements of popular culture of the western world. Crimea’s *byt* can be regarded as the desired and complementary everyday culture of the Soviet Union, characterized by abundance and density.⁴¹ Its presentation in *Ostrov Krym* distends negative traits of western capitalism as both attractive and decadent through the prism of Crimea: consumerism of luxury goods, lei-

Luchnikov junior was happy to make his father a present of the record. For him it was one more step on the road to the Idea of a Common Fate he so zealously advocated.”

40 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 36: “Да, совсем не трудно переменить курс ‘Курьера’, – подумал он. – Нет ничего легче, чем презирать эту страну, нашу страну, мою, во всяком случае. Кстати, в завтрашнем номере как раз и идет репортаж о советских дорогах. Да-да, как это я забыл, это же внутренний диссидентский материал, ему цены нет. ‘Путешествие через страну кафе’. Анонимный материал из Москвы, талантливое издательство над кошмарными советскими придорожными кафе. Быть может, этого достаточно, чтобы на несколько дней сберечь свою шкуру?” Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 37-38: “True, he thought, it wouldn’t take much to change the *Courier’s* politics. What could be easier than heaping scorn on that country, our country? As a matter of fact, the feature on Soviet roads will be running tomorrow. Right, how could I have let it slip my mind? Dissident material. Priceless. ‘Fast Food on the Road – Soviet Style’ by Anonymous, Moscow. A clever Buchwald-type piece on the nightmares of the Soviet roadside café. Who knows? It may save my skin for a few more days.”

41 Meila, “Krym u Vasiliia Aksënova”, p. 228.

sure activities, the lack of moral restrictions and a prevalence of mass culture seems to exaggerate traits of upper-class tourism. One example is Luchnikov's friend Buturlin telling him he prefers Andrei's son's dandy-like way of life – drinking, enjoying women and sleeping – to that of his own children who play Haydn, Stravinsky, Rakhmaninov and Handel.⁴² Nevertheless, in these intellectual salons condemned by Buturlin, the aristocracy socializes like in the nineteenth century, continuing a tradition of Russian piano playing.⁴³ Speaking with Olga Matich, Aksënov defends “the ultimate superiority of art to life”, as embodied through Luchnikov and Buturlin.⁴⁴ Aksënov's Crimea shows features of a technologically, aesthetically and economically developed international but still Russian society: These Crimeans live without passports, speak several languages and are allowed to move freely.⁴⁵ Here the elitism is evident, especially regarding access to symbolic resources such as education at the best European universities and the freedom of travel. It is a society for a select, aristocratic and well-to-do minority. Liberal mass culture is depicted as attractive and criticized simultaneously. Crimea even seems to be a place of *razvrat* (depravity):

В первые послесталинские годы Остров потерял уже свою мрачную, исключаящую всякие вопросы формулировку, но от этого не приблизился, а, как ни странно, даже отдалился от России. Возник образ подозрительного злчного места, международного притона, Эльдорадо авантюристов, шпионов: Там были американские военные базы, стриптизы, джаз, буги-вуги, словом, Крым еще дальше отошел от

*России, подтянулся в кильватер всяким там Гонконгам, Сингапурам, Гонолулу, стал как бы символом западного разврата, что отчасти соответствовало действительности.*⁴⁶

The heteroglossy of the novel is contained not only in the coexistence of differences but also in the hybridity, as demonstrated particularly in the fictitious Crimean language containing many loanwords from English. The language “Iaki” is defined as “смесь татарщины и русятины” (“a mixture of Tatar and Russian”).⁴⁷ This language and national culture are considered to be the best possible: “Яки – это хорошо, это среднее между ‘якиши’ и ‘окей’, это формирующаяся сейчас нация Острова Крыма, составленная из потомков татар, итальянцев, болгар, греков, турок, русских войск и британского флота.”⁴⁸ At the same time, Iaki-nationalists suppress Russian, Tatar and English speaking cultures in order to establish a Iaki-culture and language. Evidently, the novel ignores Ukrainian culture. Besides the melting of different cultures, the novel is structured by balancing the forces between the Russian past, the Soviet present and a westernized conglomeration that could

46 Ibid., p. 56; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, pp. 62-63: “Although during the early post-Stalin years the Island was no longer reduced to that one rigid, all-encompassing sentence, it did not thereby move any closer to Russia; in fact, it moved farther away. It gained the reputation of a den of iniquity, a suspicious international playground, an El Dorado of spies and adventurers. With its American military bases and striptease joints, its jazz and boogie-woogie, it seemed another Hong Kong, Singapore, Honolulu, a symbol of western decadence. And to a certain extent it was.”

47 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 22; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 20.

48 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 24; Aksyonov, *The Island of Crimea*, p. 22: “Yaki is a combination of ‘okay’ and ‘yahşi’, a Turkish word for ‘good’. It is a nation currently taking shape here on the Island of Crimea and includes the descendants of Tatars, Italians, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Turks, of the Russian army and the British navy.”

42 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, pp. 25-26.

43 Ibid., p. 174.

44 Matich, “Vasilii Aksënov and the Literature of Convergence”, p. 643.

45 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 57.

serve as a model for the future. This triangle is realized mimetically (arguing in dialogues about different political attitudes), diegetically (de- and evaluating cultural features, material objects, habits etc. of all involved cultural codes), symbolically (with the help of the two main protagonists) and compositionally, too: from chapter to chapter the novel switches locations, the action is set in the Soviet Union, mainly Moscow, Crimea and Paris. Speaking of ambivalence, Aksënov anticipates postcolonial concepts of hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry put forward by Homi Bhabha,⁴⁹ in particular the attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizers and the colonized. Instead of impersonators, ambivalence produces subjects “whose mimicry is never very far from mockery” and who “produce a profound disturbance of the authority of colonial discourse.”⁵⁰ In these terms, Aksënov’s Crimea can be described as a *third place* in the sense of Edward Soja – a realized alternative amalgamation conveyed in a surrealistic style. While the “firstplace” is a measurable, segmented material space and “secondplace” a purely mental construction,

thirdplace is the space where all spaces are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood. [...] Any attempt to capture this all-encompassing space in words and texts, for example, invokes an immediate sense of impossibility, a despair that the sequentiality of language and writing, of the narrative form and history-tell-

*ing, can never do more than scratch the surface of Thirdplace’s extraordinary simultaneities.*⁵¹ The cultural hybridity of the island provokes two contradictory questions: Are we dealing with a mirroring parody of Soviet culture where high culture (music, opera, ballet and, last but not least: literature) is meant to be accessible to the masses? Or are we dealing with criticism of western culture, which lacks the Soviet Union’s idealism, and thus any profound meaning of life? In its paradox simultaneity of ingratiation to western freedom and criticism of western mass culture, the novel actually performs a key concept of Russian culture. Aleksandr Kabakov calls the novel a “warning” (“roman-preduprezhdenie”)⁵² and, besides, a “bytovoi roman” (“novel of everyday life”) in which the love stories do not appeal to the reader’s empathy as they are more sexual than emotional.⁵³ Although the political systems of Crimea and the Soviet Union are completely different in this novel, they resemble each other in their non-transparency, surveillance and power-driven decision-making. Assuming this parallelity, everyday culture is a means of identity shaping – it acquires the role of conveying the most striking differences you can experience between the island and its ‘Big Brother’ in both political spheres.

Intercultural and intertextual points of contact

As Michael Idov points out, the novel is taken into account whenever Russia comes to a turning point as it captures the principal duality of Russia which “is both the island and the

49 Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, *October* 28, 1984, pp. 125-133.

50 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, London, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 13.

51 Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, London: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 56-58.

52 Aleksandr Kabakov and Evgenij Popov, *Aksënov*, Moskva: AST, 2001, p. 369.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 367.

mainland, a reef of free thought and a colossus poised to stomp it out of existence".⁵⁴ To the contemporary Soviet reader, the novel has probably invited giggles of dizzy disorientation: "A skyscraper—in Simferopol! The idea that a newspaper can be called a 'Russian' (as opposed to 'Soviet') anything, let alone an ultra-bourgeois 'Courier'! Where in the world *are* we? Where we are, in fact, is not in an earnest counter-historical what-if but instead inside the eternal fever dream of the Russian intellectual: what Russia could have been if not for the path it chose. While Aksyonov paints the neighboring U.S.S.R. as an inferno of scarcity, cruelty, and idiocy—somehow managing to sound like an outside observer (he wrote the book just before emigrating to the United States)—he can't help gleefully stuffing his imaginary Crimea with every cool thing that a Soviet hipster could think of: high-speed freeways, a hopping jazz scene, swinger clubs, an auto industry producing Peter-Turbo roadsters and luxurious Russo-Balt cars (an actual brand whose production ceased with the revolution), Novy Svet champagne, posh villas, Burgessian Russo-Anglo-Tatar youth slang, and a tony night club named after Nabokov. And then he proceeds to throw it all under the Russian tank tracks."⁵⁵ In this fictional Crimea, the Whites and their offspring have established a pre-revolutionary society with three different political parties, all antagonistic towards the Soviet Union. In the narrative, capturing the late 1960s and 1970s, the island's opposition towards the Soviet Union is depicted as unstable. Herein we can indicate the crucial dialogical moment of

a communication between the proposed visions. On the one hand, we encounter some affirmation of the new Soviet Union without Stalin whereas, on the other hand, we face its renunciation as there is still some home for a return to pre-revolutionary society and an orientation towards Western European life. The novel does not align itself with a special – utopian or dystopian – tradition of writing on Crimea, as it contradicts its own positive picture at the end. It still corresponds with the so called *Crimea-text* which tends to glorify the peninsula as a Russian project of (over-) Europeanness and to regard it as a welcomed southern supplement to the northern country, and, so to speak, its paradisiac garden.⁵⁶ The *Crimea-text*, Aleksandr Liusyi's term in accordance with Vladimir Toporov's *Petersburg-text* (*Peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury*),⁵⁷ assumes an intertextual network of sujets, figures and symbols in the Russian literature of the classicism, romanticism and symbolism, coined by canonical poems, stories, pictures and becoming part of popular Russian culture, too.⁵⁸ In sum, thanks to the intertextuality of medial representations, the fictional Crimea has grown into a popular, common and community strengthening *locus amoenus*, a vivid imagination of an arcadian place with high symbolical value. Apparently, the novel's polyphony is a parallel to Aksönov's trilogy *Ozhog* (*The Burn*, Ann Arbor 1980). Here, the narrative presents different social environments in Moscow, includ-

54 Michael Idov, "The Novel that Predicts Russia's Invasion of Crimea", *The New Yorker*, 2 March 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-novel-that-predicts-russias-invasion-of-crimea>, accessed 25 October 2017.

55 Ibid.

56 Kerstin S. Jobst, *Die Perle des Imperiums: Der russische Krim-Diskurs im Zarenreich*, Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2007, p. 136; Elisabeth W. Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011, p. 116.

57 Vladimir N. Toporov, *Peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury: izbrannye trudy*, Sankt-Peterburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2003.

58 Aleksandr Liusyi, *Krymskii tekst v russkoi literature*, Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteija, 2003, p. 15: 195.

ing its underground and dissident milieu, by using polyperspectivism, exaggeration, mixing language codes and provocative allusions. As Per Dalgård states, the grotesque and polyphonic narrative with its overlapping of the fantastic and the realistic, of avantgardism and realism and its ambivalence towards the opposite ends of a spectrum, like the old vs. the new, the beginning vs. the end of the metamorphosis is fundamental to Aksënov's works.⁵⁹ Dalgård refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the grotesque's dialectical dimension as a means of estrangement that can have a satirical function dominating composition as well as style.⁶⁰ The grotesque style tends to use folk and folklore elements.⁶¹ In the novel discussed here, these are supplemented by linguistic elements, material culture and social practices of Soviet and western everyday culture, hence contributing to the novel's partly grotesque ambiguity. The novel's western orientation appears to be anti-Soviet: Moscow and its function as an imperial capital are not taken seriously by the *Iaki* speakers who sharpen the de-ideologization of Soviet speech patterns. This attitude spans from the ironic use of Soviet abbreviations and slogans⁶² to mockery of 'Soviet' literary style.⁶³ Soviet literature is vilified by the narrator or provokes some nostalgia in terms of the interesting Soviet literature hav-

ing disappeared as many of the *Shestidesiatniki* have left.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the intertextual reference to George Orwell stresses the text's orientation towards western political satire. By contrast, the novel shows solidarity with pre-Soviet Russian literature as Aksënov's style demonstrates similarities to that of Andrei Belyi and Nikolai Gogol'.⁶⁵ There are also allusions to Mandelshtam and Chekhov.⁶⁶ Actually, the question of geocultural development has occupied Russian literature and philosophy since Peter the Great's policy of Europeanization. Olga Matich states that Aksënov's text represents a pronounced self-criticism and a kind of parody on other literary parodies of his time.⁶⁷ The irony runs parallel to the grotesque ambivalence and can be read as anti-utopian pessimism: The novel leaves a rather non-entertaining message about a problematic future with the cultural and political dialogue interrupted. Aleksandr Kabakov stresses that *Ostrov*

64 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, p. 58.

65 Aksënov's poetic style has parallels to that of Nikolai Gogol: "1.) use of poetic devices: play with sound, rhythm, alliteration, repetition etc., 2.) retardation of the epic narrative; lack of the conventional, logical-causal development of plot, character and action, replaced by 3.) development of a lyrical theme shown in its various aspects, from different points of view, creating a mosaic of motives, symbols, themes etc." Per Dalgård, "Some Literary Roots of Aksënov's Writings: Affinities and Parallels", *Vasilij Pavlovich Aksënov: A Writer in Quest of Himself*, ed. Edward Mozheiko, Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1986, pp. 68-86, here pp. 69-70.

66 Aksënov, *Ostrov Krym*, pp. 131, 165.

67 "In the broadest sense, then, *Ostrov Krym* reflects the demythologizing tendency in post-Stalin Soviet literature, a tendency that began with the revision of socialist realism and the Stalinist version of Soviet history. Although the novel contains dissident political ideas and satirical images of Soviet reality, it is first and foremost self-critical, demythologizing Aksënov's own utopian motifs of the 1960s – the supermen heroes and beautiful ladies in western garb who put their faith in the magically simple convergence panacea. Exposing liberal ideology, *Ostrov Krym* presents grad secular causes in the name of the people as naive, perfidious, and self-serving." (Matich, "Vasilij Aksënov and the Literature of Convergence", p. 651.)

59 Per Dalgård, *The Function Of The Grotesque In Vasilij Aksënov*, transl. by Robert Porter, Århus: Arkona 1982, pp. 5 and 11.

60 Ibid., pp. 14, 20, 24.

61 Ibid., p. 29.

62 Anatoly Vishevsky and Timothy Pogacar, "The Function of Conventional Language Pattern in the Prose of Vassilij Aksënov", *Vasilij Pavlovich Aksënov: A Writer in Quest of Himself*, ed. Edward Mozheiko, Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1986, pp. 131-146, here pp. 135-7.

63 Ibid., p. 136. The authors tell the following example: "For instance, a KGB officer in *The Island of Crimea* paraphrases the well known lines of Pavel Korchagin from Nikolay Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*." Ibid., p. 143.

Krym occupies an outstanding position within Russian literature of the twentieth century: Following the publication of Evgenii Zamiatin's *My (We)* from 1920, anti-utopian novels were en vogue for a brief period, but for the next three decades no anti-utopias were published either in the USSR or in exile.⁶⁸

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In Aksënov's novel, the Soviet Union represents the Other with the ambiguity of a cultural double-bind. It represents the Russianness Luchnikov is looking for, and the background for Lunina's imagination of a better life. Interweaving the protagonists' destinies, the narration demonstrates the aesthetical productivity of confronting different ways of life. Thus, the novel offers not only an alternative history, suggesting an anti-Soviet, old-fashioned pro-tsarist concept,⁶⁹ but an open discussion of three evolved cultural mindsets, which are all crucial for Russian self-conception: pre-revolutionary Russian, Soviet and European. There is actually a fourth: Crimean hybridity. Aksënov's novel can be read as part of the underground pop culture in the late Soviet Union as well as a space for discussion of its non-official, desired, demanded or dreaded cultural vectors. Leaving the novel's opposition towards Soviet culture aside, the heteroglossy of cultural issues makes this text interesting for cultural studies focusing on the late Soviet Union. We

can observe the negotiation of mass culture(s) as a prospective vision for the Soviet Union. The novel does not try to preserve, insist or convince of one possible way, but rather asks: *quo vadis?* Exposing his readers to all possibilities in an ambivalent, at times grotesque manner, Aksënov challenges them to continue the dialogue of Russian and Un-Russian ideas.

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Tatjana Hofmann studied Cultural, Slavonic and Germanic Studies at Humboldt-University in Berlin. Afterwards she wrote her PhD-thesis about the representation of Ukraine in contemporary prose (*Literarische Ethnografien der Ukraine*, Basel 2014). Since 2012 she has worked at the Slavic Department of the University of Zurich where she was editor member of the literature magazine *Variations*. From 2012 to 2014 she was associated in the project *Region, Nation, and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Reconsideration of Ukraine* at the University of St. Gallen. She edited works by Sergei Tret'iakov. Currently she writes a study on Soviet journalism and travellogues. Crimea belongs to her areas of interests.

⁶⁸ Kabakov and Popov, *Aksënov*, p. 366.

⁶⁹ Aleksandr Kabakov says about *Ostrov Krym* and its writer: "Мифология русского белого движения, апологетика царской России. То есть он на какое-то время отошел от своего либерального ухмылочного отношения к тому нашему прошлому." Kabakov and Popov, *Aksënov*, p. 91.